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CIA Sought 3rd-Country Contra Aid

By Bob Woodward
Washington Post Staff Writer

The CIA unofficially asked Saudi Arabia and Israel last month to provide covert support for the U.S. intelligence agency's secret operations against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, according to informed sources.

The Saudi government turned down the request. But the sources said some U.S. intelligence officials have claimed that Israel provided some type of well-concealed financial assistance to U.S.-backed guerrillas, called "contras," who are conducting paramilitary operations against the leftist government in Managua.

A senior Israeli official denied this yesterday, saying, "We have not supplied any money to the contras, either directly or indirectly. We are not consciously or with knowledge passing anything to the contras .... We are not a surrogate for the United States."

According to U.S. sources, the Israeli assistance reportedly totals several million dollars and appears to be reaching the contras through a South American intermediary. The United States might repay Israel for this unofficial assistance, the sources said, in the $2.5 billion in military and economic aid it annually sends to Israel.

Asked about overtures to Saudi Arabia and Israel, a senior Reagan administration official said this week, "There were lots of conversations ... but nothing of that character that was official." The Saudi contact, according to this official, was "totally unauthorized."

Sources said that Reagan administration lawyers questioned the legality of any CIA effort to circumvent Congress, which so far has refused to approve additional money the administration has requested for the covert operations. Another well-placed official said about the Saudi contact, "In a sense [the United States] didn't ask and [the Saudis] didn't say no ... but of course it happened."

The Reagan administration appears to be making wide-ranging efforts to keep the contras supplied with money and equipment while Congress remains in a stalemate over further funding for the secret operations against Nicaragua's government. In at least one case, congressional sources said yesterday, the CIA borrowed aircraft from the U.S. Air Force and loaned it to the rebels at no cost.

This circuitous process, described by congressional sources as "bailment," appears to allow the CIA to get around the financial limits imposed by Congress on aid to the contras. The sources said they believe the CIA may have borrowed other aircraft or ships, but not arms, from the Defense Department.

According to the congressional sources, the CIA has about $1 million left of the $24 million that Congress last approved for aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

The Nicaraguan Democratic Force, largest of the three rebel groups receiving U.S. aid, announced yesterday that its forces had captured a government outpost in a southern part of Nicaragua called Chontales. If true, this would indicate that the rebels still have the strength to open a new front.

In the current atmosphere of reciprocity between the Israeli and U.S. intelligence agencies, Israeli assistance to the contras would not be out of the question, according to both U.S. and Israeli sources. Several officials said that William J. Casey, in his three years as CIA director, has provided Israeli intelligence with access to sensitive satellite photographs and other reconnaissance information that had been denied the Israelis in the late 1970s.

Several contra leaders have been quoted recently, as they were last year, as saying that they had made arrangements to get assistance from Israel. Several well-placed sources said it is apparent that some type of alternative funding got through to the contras after Congress refused last month to approve the $21 million requested by President Reagan for the covert operations.

"The desperation of April has turned to the confidence of May," said one source. A senior Reagan administration official yesterday attributed the new mood of confidence to "lots of scrounging around" by the contras.

Both Casey and other CIA officials have denied to the House and Senate Intelligence committees that they have any personal knowledge of a third country providing money to the contras.

Two sources described the following sequence of events for the back-channel request to Saudi Arabia after The Washington Post published an April 13 report in which an unidentified source revealed that the CIA was considering the possibility of asking "another country, such as Saudi Arabia, to send money to the contras." The source was a U.S. official, although not identified as such in the report.

Soon after the report appeared, a CIA official asked a Saudi official if the well-placed source had been a Saudi and whether Saudi Arabia was hinting interest in helping to support the contras. The Saudi official replied negatively, according to the sources, and then was pressed by the U.S. official, who noted that the requested $20 million to $30 million would be "peanuts" for the oil-rich kingdom.

The Saudi official then agreed to check officially at high levels of his government. The sources said the reply was negative, with these reasons given:

- The Saudis believed that the CIA could not or would not really offer anything of substance in return.
- The Saudis generally disagreed with many aspects of U.S. policy in Central America. The Nicaraguan government, which the CIA is harassing through its support of the contras, is essentially pro-Arab, while two U.S.-backed countries in the region—Costa Rica and El Salvador—recently moved their embassies in Israel to the city of Jerusalem, a move opposed by Arab states, including Saudi Arabia.
- The Saudis claimed they had no confidence that secrets could be kept in the Reagan administration and that any covert Saudi aid soon would be reported in the American press and embarrass them.

The extent of U.S.-Israeli cooperation on intelligence matters is a matter of some concern in the CIA. Some officials believe that Casey has gone too far. Others say, however, that the United States gets much crucial information in return from the well-respected Israeli services.

Retired Israeli Maj. Gen. Yehoshua Saguy, who was head of Israeli military intelligence from 1979 to 1983, said in an interview earlier this year that the CIA now gives the Israelis access to data from reconnaissance satellites "not only the information but the photos themselves .... Casey now says 'yes' all the time." Saguy said Casey's action was "very wise politically" and confirmed it was a reversal from the policy of CIA director Stansfield Turner, who left office in early 1981.

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A STRATEGY FOR THE 90'S

By Stansfield Turner

WE IN THE American military can be scarcely satisfied with our achievements in combat since World War II. Despite abundant personal bravery and many individual battles won, we fought to a draw in Korea, we lost in Vietnam, and we failed miserably in the hostage rescue operation in Iran. Only in such lopsided engagements as the Dominican intervention, the Mayaguez affair and the Grenada invasion can we claim success.

For this indifferent record we military men often blame the civilian leaders who set the country's objectives and then placed limits on the kind of force we could employ — sometimes to the point of directing combat operations from the White House. There is considerable truth to this charge, but we can draw little consolation from it.

The bottom line in the military profession is to win wars. That means anticipating where and in what circumstances the nation's forces may have to be used next, and fitting weapons and tactics to those ends. It is in this task of formulating military strategy that we military have not measured up. It is here that we must do better if we are to avoid more setbacks on the Korean, Vietnamese and Iranian patterns.

It may seem unnecessary to emphasize the importance of strategy, since military men have traditionally made that their central consideration. Yet the fact is that broad strategy has come to be an academic matter in our armed forces, not something that affects day-to-day decisions. The classical strategists are still taught in our war colleges. But these men, writing 50 to 150 years ago, could confine themselves to one-dimensional concepts. Clausewitz made the case for a land strategy, Mahan for a maritime one, and Douhet for a new air strategy that could replace both. There was little need to consider choices between weapons systems. Troops were troops, though they might be employed in differing maneuvers; ships were ships, though they might be sailed in different formations, and aircraft were aircraft, though they might be engaged against different types of targets.

Much of this has been outdated by modern technology that offers many choices between weapons systems. For instance, troops come in many forms — infantry, light armored, heavy armored, airborne, helo-borne, alpine and others, and there are all kinds of artillery and missiles for equipping them. Technology also enables the weapons of one element, such as sea, to play roles in another element, such as land. For instance, naval forces can envelop a flank with an amphibious assault, and air forces can compete with either army artillery or naval guns in direct attacks on the battlefield. Strategic doctrine confined to the principles of warfare, as enumerated by the classical writers, still has much to teach us, but it is deficient as a guide to what needs to be done today.

Yet as the classic strategists have become less relevant to the new dimensions of warfare, their place has not been taken by contemporary strategists willing to address the trade-offs in men and arms that have been made possible by new technologies. The result has been a state of affairs in which — as Bernard Brodie put it in his 1973 book "War and Politics" — "soldiers are close students of tactics, but only rarely of strategy and practically never of war."

Sound tactics are essential, of course, to victory in the field. But it is sound strategy that gives the local commander the right number and kind of troops and weapons to achieve his objectives. Failure to formulate that kind of strategy is the basic reason for our military reverses in the past 34 years. Might we not have been better off in Korea if we had traded some heavy divisions for some light, mobile ones that could have been moved in rapidly enough to avert our retreat to the Pusan perimeter? Might we not have been better prepared for the Vietnam War if some divisions trained and equipped for combat in Europe had been traded off for units specializing in jungle warfare? Might we not have succeeded in Iran if we had diverted some resources and training to preparing for small, lightning thrusts at long distances?

To do better in the future, we need to find strategies that fit today's realities. What follows is an attempt to provide a starting point.

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IN MAINTAINING ITS MILITARY ESTABLISHment, the United States today has three broad objectives in view: (1) to deter nuclear war or be ready to wage such war if deterrence fails; (2) to assist in the defense of Western Europe and South Korea, the two areas where we have stationed American combat forces, and (3) to be able to intervene in other areas of the world if our interests require such action. Any attempt to define more precisely what kinds of military power will be most needed in the next decade or two must begin by establishing priorities among these three objectives. For instance, how likely is a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, or some other development that would bring us to the brink of nuclear war? Although judgments on all such questions must be largely subjective, we have a better chance of reaching sensible choices if the assumptions behind them are laid out and subjected to orderly debate.

For example, in weighing the relative importance of our three national objectives — nuclear deterrence, defense of Western Europe and South Korea, and an ability to intervene around the world — I would not place nuclear deterrence at the top of my list of strategic priorities.

I do assume that the greatest threat to our country is a nuclear war; nothing is more crucial than to keep up our nuclear guard. However, I also assume that no Soviet leader could be sure that his country would emerge from such a war in one piece if he initiated a nuclear attack against the United States. Even if he thought that his nuclear forces could do relatively more damage to us than we could do to the Soviet Union, the absolute level of damage to the Soviet side would be so great that he would have little incentive to attack. To maintain this deterrent effect, what we need to do is insure that we maintain a large nuclear retaliatory capability invulnerable to surprise attack. What with our strategic ballistic-missile submarines, the new B-1 and Stealth bombers and the cruise missiles that are becoming available, maintaining that kind of deterrent appears rather easy to do. Hence, for all its overriding importance, nuclear deterrence does not require top-priority consideration in strategic terms at this time.

We then come to the defense of Western Europe. Here, our posture is more precarious; the balance of conventional forces in the European theater continues to tilt against us. However, this imbalance cannot be corrected by the United States; it can be done only in conjunction with our European allies. Until they make a greater effort in manpower and resources in their own defense, it would be foolish for us to step up our military contribution. Hence, I view this as a low priority for the time being.

Finally, we come to intervention in the third world. Six times since World War II we have gone into combat in such areas. I assume we are likely to do so again, since instability in the developing countries is likely to be at least as widespread in the years ahead. Our inadequate performance in three of those combat situations points to our lack of preparedness for this type of warfare.

These assumptions lead me to conclude that our most urgent need is to be better prepared in the area where we are most likely to be challenged — namely, in intervention around the world. Nuclear deterrence, though it is our most vital objective, comes second on my list because, in this area, we are already well prepared. I would thus set my priorities as follows: intervention, first; nuclear deterrence, second, and defense of Western Europe and South Korea, third.

Ranking our national objectives is still a long way from having an adequate strategy to guide our choices among weapons systems and tactics. The range of possible trade-offs is so broad, however, that I am going to narrow the field of consideration to the United States Navy. What I propose to do is develop a specific strategy for the Navy in the 1980's and 1990's — but only as an illustration of what needs to be done in all three armed services. The importance will be not so much in the actual strategy I propose as in the technique for reaching it.

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Navies can be shaped to provide three capabilities in wartime — controlling those sea lanes that we need to utilize, projecting power onto land by amphibious assaults, and projecting power onto land by bombardment with aircraft or missiles. In shaping our naval strategy, we need to determine which of these three capabilities is the most important to achieving each of our three national political objectives.

Remember that, of these three objectives, we have given top priority to intervention. Therefore, the naval capability that is most important to us is the one that most enhances our ability to intervene in the third world.

What, then, is the most important contribution the Navy can make to that ability? In my view, amphibious assault. In justifying that conclusion, I intend to lay out my assumptions regarding the Navy's role as explicitly as I did in translating our national objectives into our overall strategic priorities.

To begin with, I believe that in today's political climate in the third world, it would be unwise to count on having bases in remote areas for the staging of our forces, as we did in South Korea and South

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Vietnam. We should not even count on arrangements to have bases ready for us to use when we need them. Presumably, we will not want to intervene overseas unless it is highly important to our country. In such cases, we must be able to act independently. That means being capable of seizing the necessary points of entry, preferably airfields and ports. And that makes amphibious forces the indispensable element.

What naval capability would I place second in order of importance to our ability to intervene? I would select sea control, to assure our amphibious forces of the protection they need. The reason is that modern technologies, such as precision-guided missiles, enable even a secondary military power to pose a threat to an amphibious assault force coming close to its shores. Recall the damage inflicted by the Argentines on the British expeditionary fleet in the Falkland War.

That leaves the lowest priority — in terms of intervention — to naval bombardment. This assumes that the kind of opposition we are likely to face in third-world areas can be handled initially without lots of air cover. It also assumes that once amphibious assault secures an airfield, bombardment support will be quickly provided by forces funneled in by the Army and Air Force.

Overall, then, the intervention objective calls for a Navy with a sizable number of amphibious task forces distributed in remote areas of the world and protected by naval carrier task forces in control of the sea lanes.

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So much for the kind of Navy best suited to our top strategic objective, ability to intervene. How should the Navy be shaped to serve our second-priority objective, nuclear deterrence?

In exactly the opposite way. Bombardment capability would come first, sea control would be second, and there would be no requirement for amphibious assault.

The key assumption behind this conclusion is that fixed nuclear weapons, like the land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's), are dying. The reconnaissance abilities of satellites in orbit make it possible to detect and identify anything as large as an ICBM. Improved accuracy makes it possible to destroy almost anything immobile, once it has been detected. Therefore, the United States is going to move more of its strategic bombardment capability to ships and submarines at sea. And to insure the continued invulnerability of our increased numbers of strategic bombardment forces at sea, we would have to place increased importance on control of the sea lanes.

The Navy I would shape for nuclear deterrence — our second-priority national objective — would place emphasis on strategic ballistic-missile submarines, cruise missiles on surface ships and submarines, and a vigorous research program to stay at the forefront of those technologies that might make these ships and submarines vulnerable.

What naval capabilities would be most important to our third-priority national objective, the defense of Western Europe and South Korea? Sea control, without question. The United States cannot fight a war in Europe or Korea without assured use of the sea lanes, and that assurance has come under threat as a result of the growth and improvement of the Soviet Navy. Because winning the war at sea against the Soviet Navy would be difficult enough, we could not risk losing any naval forces in either bombardment or amphibious assault operations until we were firmly in control of the sea lanes.

The Navy best suited for the defense of Western Europe and South Korea would, therefore, contain a wide range of sea-control forces, including carrier task forces, submarines, surface-ship escorts, patrol aircraft and mines.

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How, then, do we decide among these three navies in shaping our naval strategy for the 1980's and 1990's?

Theoretically, highest priority should go to amphibious assault, because that is the naval function most necessary to our top-priority political objective — capacity to intervene in the third world. It can be argued, however, that since sea control heads the Navy's list under one national objective (defense of Western Europe and South Korea) and places second under the other two objectives, it warrants at least as much importance as amphibious assault. In my view, it's a toss-up.

Behind both of these come bombardment forces for strategic deterrence, bombardment forces for intervention and bombardment forces for the defense of Europe and Korea.

If this strategy were implemented, we would thus have a Navy with:

(1) Enough amphibious forces to seize a foothold quickly in remote areas of the globe, and to provide time for the airlift of Army troops from the United States.

(2) Sufficient sea-control capabilities to assure the safety of our amphibious assault forces, of shipping employed to resupply our forces in Europe and Korea, and of our nuclear deterrent forces at sea.

(3) A strengthened strategic bombardment capability at sea.

This broad-brush picture is hardly sufficient, however; we now need to fill in the details.

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Just what type of amphibious forces do we want?

My first assumption is that, since we have not done well in the past predicting where we would intervene, we will not do much better in the future. That means we are going to need large numbers of amphibious forces. They move in slow ships; only by having them deployed widely around the world will they have a reasonable chance of being close enough to the scene of action to get there quickly.

I also assume that we should prepare for assaults by units of about brigade size, against relatively light opposition, and with a view to seizing airheads and holding them just long enough to permit the Army to take over the ground operations.

How about sea control?

There are three tactics of sea control — blockade, attrition and point defense (or last-ditch defense by the ships themselves). A blockade aims at preventing the enemy from coming out from his bases to attack you. A total blockade of Soviet submarines, ships and aircraft would have to be imposed by large aircraft carriers, with large numbers of attack aircraft conducting attacks on numerous Soviet bases. This is not a viable tactic against the Soviet Union. The United States Navy would be at maximum disadvantage fighting in the Russians' backyard; it could lose so many aircraft carriers that its ability to defend the sea lanes would be undermined.

Attrition, on the other hand, holds out great advantages. Much of the Soviet Navy must pass through a number of geographical choke points as its ships, submarines and aircraft leave their bases and make for the Pacific and the Atlantic. This makes them all the more vulnerable to our superior detection technologies, and makes it easier for our submarines, mines and long-range aircraft to knock them out.

As for point defense, this includes the carriers' aircraft, as well as their missiles, guns and various electronic decoying and deception techniques. Some point defense is always necessary, since neither blockade nor attrition can be counted on to eliminate the enemy threat entirely.

Where does that leave us on the best tactics for sea control? In an engagement pitting us against the Soviet Union in the defense of Western Europe or South Korea, blockade is impractical; we would have to rely on attrition and point defense. In intervening against lesser powers, however, we should be able to use the blockade tactic as well, by attacking their bases from our carrier aircraft. For sea control, the Navy would thus put point defense first, attrition second and blockade capabilities third.

That, of course, places strong reliance on the ability of aircraft carriers to defend themselves and the ships they escort against enemy aircraft, submarines and surface vessels. What type of aircraft carriers are best suited to point defense?

We are approaching a time when the performance characteristics of a carrier's aircraft will be less important than the capabilities of the aircraft's missiles. Instead of adding speed or maneuverability to a manned aircraft, we will find it easier to put high performance into the missiles it launches. That means we can afford to have lighter planes on our carriers, such as vertical-takeoff aircraft. And that, in turn, means that the aircraft carriers can be smaller and less expensive.

What would a shift to smaller carriers do to the third of the Navy's basic capabilities — bombardment by aircraft or missiles? Today's large aircraft carriers are primarily plaforms for launching large numbers of large aircraft on bombing missions. Would a shift to larger numbers of smaller carriers vitiate this capability?

The answer is that it would not. In the first place, we will have 12 or more large carriers for another 20 years or so, even if we build no more of that size. Beyond that, the nature of aerial bombardment is changing; the bomb is going to be replaced by precision-guided missiles fired from planes far from the target area, and this will reduce the need for large, high-performance bombers that can penetrate enemy defenses.

This course seems indicated by yet another factor. The already minor role of naval aircraft in the defense of Western Europe is being further diminished by a change of Army doctrine calling for air strikes deep behind enemy lines. This would move enemy targets still farther away from our aircraft carriers offshore.

What of the Navy's role as a nuclear deterrent? Preserving the invulnerability of our seagoing missile forces is the nation's most important military requirement. Yet we must assume that our currently largely invulnerable ballistic-missile submarines will become more detectable over time. We cannot predict which of their characteristics — their magnetism, their radiation, their sound, or whatever — will give them away, but the bigger the submarine, the more visible any such "signature" is likely to be. Therefore, it is advisable to begin moving toward smaller ballistic-missile submarines.

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In reviewing the nation's strategic objectives and examining how the Navy can best contribute to their attainment, we have already decided that the Navy's capacities for amphibious assault and sea control come first, that strategic bombardment comes second, and that tactical bombardment comes last. Now, having looked at the available weapons in more detail, we can be more specific about what types of naval forces would best carry out those functions. According to this formulation of strategy, the United States Navy, it seems to me, should be going today for the following weapons and programs, in just about this order of priority:

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(1) Larger numbers of amphibious ships deployed in brigade-sized units.

(2) Lots of small aircraft carriers, with light aircraft and precision-guided missiles for sea control.

(3) New, small strategic submarines.

(4) Strategic cruise missiles on submarines and surface ships.

(5) Submarines and surface-ship escorts for point defense and sea control.

(6) Submarines, mines and patrol aircraft for attrition operations.

(7) Research and development on maintaining submarine invulnerability.

These objectives would require substantial changes in how the Navy is being shaped for the future. They would force the Navy into a strategy of being the cutting edge for military intervention in the third world through the use of amphibious assaults backed by strong sea control capabilities; of concentrating support for the defense of Western Europe and South Korea on maintenance of the sea lanes through point defense and attrition tactics, and of assuming as much of the responsibility for maintaining a secure strategic retaliatory capability as the country wants to have at sea.

Some may disagree with the substance of such a strategy. However, my main purpose in this article is not to prescribe the best possible strategy but to demonstrate how one can be formulated, step by step, on the basis of specific assumptions. The same model, of course, could be used for working out priorities for the Army and the Air Force. And then, using the same working principle, all three lists of priorities could be woven into one overall military strategy for the nation.

If a reader disputes any of my assumptions, or believes there are other more important ones, he can substitute his own assumptions and demonstrate — in the same explicit manner — how they would lead to a different naval strategy. For instance, I concluded from our interventions in Korea, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Iran and Grenada that we are likely to intervene again. Others might conclude that the results in Vietnam and Iran were so damaging to our national cohesion and pride that we should avoid all such involvements in the future. They would, therefore, rank intervention at the bottom, rather than the top, of the priority list of national military objectives.

The point is that even if such a critic and I were never able to agree on what were the right assumptions to make, it would be clear where our differences lay. We could debate them explicitly. Such debate would be a valuable part of the strategy-formulation process.

It is debate of that sort — identifying our broad national objectives in proper order and setting the military priorities that flow logically from such a list — that has been lacking thus far. And it is this deficiency that has caused us to suffer military reverses for lack of the right kind of troops, with the right training and weapons, at the right place at the right time.

The United States military is at a crossroads. The failures in Vietnam and Iran have badly damaged the nation's self-confidence. There is a temptation among the military to believe that it is up to the political leaders to avoid future debacles — by maneuvering around situations that could lead to the use of force on terms unfavorable to us, and by not placing undue limits on the use of force once we are engaged in combat.

We military men would be foolish, however, to count on a much more perfect set of decisions in the years ahead. We should admit that, whatever the errors on the civilian side, we could have been more responsive in Korea, Vietnam and Iran if we had done a better job of formulating strategy — that is, of anticipating the kind of demands likely to be placed on us.

It will take combined military and civilian dedication to prepare our armed forces better for their battle tests in the future. It will also require a systematic approach to translating broad political objectives into decisions on hardware, training and tactics. The longer we continue without a systematic approach to formulating military strategy, the more we risk repetition of our shortcomings on the battlefields of Korea, Vietnam and Iran. And the next test may not be as facile as Grenada. ■

Stansfield Turner is a retired admiral and a former Director of Central Intelligence. This article is adapted from a chapter he contributed to "The Art and Practice of Military Strategy," a collection edited by Capt. George Thibault, to be published by the National Defense University.

3 May 1984

STAT

Ex-CIA Director: U.S. Heading to Humiliation

By Charles Holmes
Staff Writer

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner warned yesterday that the Reagan administration's policies of increased covert aid to Nicaraguan guerrillas and military aid to the beleaguered regime in El Salvador "don't have more than about a 25 percent chance" of success.

U.S. foreign policy in Central America could unravel as it has in the Middle East and "ride to a second humiliation" unless the Reagan administration seeks to negotiate with nations in the region and pushes for reforms within the Salvadoran government, Turner said.

Stansfield Turner

"I judge that we're heading more likely toward a humiliation as we did in Lebanon," Turner said in a broad-ranging foreign policy address at The Breakers in Palm Beach.

Turner denounced the use of CIA-directed military activities against the leftist government in Nicaragua. He said the United States should instead be seeking greater reforms from the government in El Salvador and compromise among the battling factions of the region.

It was disclosed last month that the CIA had supervised the mining of Nicaraguan ports earlier this year. At least five foreign ships, including a Soviet oil tanker, were damaged by the mines.

"It's difficult to distinguish that state-supported terrorism (the bombing of Marine headquarters in Beirut) from the mining of Nicaraguan harbors," Turner said.

The U.S. must work with the Contadora group of nations, which are Mexico, Venezuela, Panama and Columbia, for a negotiated settlement in the region, he said.

"I don't think the problems of Central America can be resolved without reforms . . . It's a mistake to be applying the CIA's covert operations there," he said.

"What we're going to have to do is learn to restrain ourselves and learn to work with the Contadora group," he said.

Turner, a retired Navy admiral and CIA chief during the Carter administration, said the agency's covert paramilitary capability is a "legitimate tool," but the CIA could suffer adverse public opinion in the U.S. because it is being "misapplied" in Central America.

On Wednesday, the House Appropriations Committee turned down a Reagan administration request for additional immediate military aid for El Salvador. The Senate had voted to approve $61.7 million for the Salvadoran regime.

Turner also questioned administration claims of the importance of the area to U.S. interests.

"I do not think the American public truly believes Central America is vital to the interests of the United States," he said.

Addressing the annual meeting of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores, Turner urged the group to ignore campaign-year rhetoric and closely examine foreign policy issues.

He also urged firm but patient dealings with the Soviet Union, which he said is still attempting to work out its leadership problems following the death of Yuri Andropov.

U.S.-Soviet relations have suffered from the stalemate at the arms bargaining table, Turner said.

"I don't know when it's ever been worse in terms of the lack of communications," he said.

The integrity of the state of Israel and a free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf are America's two main concerns in the Middle East, he said.

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Lebanon, the U.S. should attempt to regain its role as arbiter in the region, he said.

He also accused Reagan of misapplying defense funding. The Soviets could gain an edge in naval and ground forces and the U.S. should bolster its conventional forces rather than create new nuclear weapons, Turner said.